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Phenomenologically absurd, absurdly phenomenological

Jodie McNeilly-Renaudie and Pierre-Jean Renaudie

The concept of the absurd in theatre has been inviolably tied up with Martin Esslin's appropriation of the term explicated in his 1961 text "The Theatre of the Absurd". While presenting an excellent thorough-going history of writers and theatre practitioners associated with the very tradition the book ascribes, Esslin arguably creates the problem of a contextual limit for theatre works, past, present and future that is understood, or experienced as absurd. Even though phenomenological scholars of Samuel Beckett's theatre argue that the French existentialist theories Esslin's analysis relies upon is "dated" and "over-use[d]", his ideas continue to dominate and prevent a much fuller experiential understanding of the absurd in the theatre (Hennessy 2015, 1).[1]

Broadly defined, Esslin's concept of the absurd pivots upon a particular version of existentialism that foregrounds notions of uncertainty, loss of meaning, nothingness, irrationality and the senselessness and purposelessness of life.[2] Fundamentally, human existence is characterised as faltering in its encounter with the world. It is an ontological category: the 'being of' a dislocated individual exiled from their own life. Such an existentialist definition, or terms akin to it, rejects common definitions of the absurd: "out of harmony with propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical", or simply "ridiculous" (Esslin 23). Undoubtedly, however, these common definitions are in fact much closer to describing the experience of the phenomenon that we call absurd. When these definitions are existentially developed within a context like that of the interwar and/or postwar years of the twentieth century, it indeed makes sense to characterise absurdity in the way that Esslin and

[1] There are 'first', 'second' and 'third' waves of Beckett scholarship. The reading of his plays in the first are interpreted through early French and German existentialism (Esslin forms part of this wave), the second wave of the 80s and 90s is characterised by deconstructionist tendencies, while the third is understood as 'empirical' with a return to the archives and Beckett's 'grey canon'. Newer studies intersect with the ubiquitous neuro and cognitive brain sciences, while feminism offers unorthodox readings to the field. See Hennessy 2015.

[2] While these terms may be associated more redolently with writers like Albert Camus, it is more problematic to attribute them to Jean-Paul Sartre. Despite strong affiliations with the absurdist movement, his literary journalism and own literary work, Sartre defended existentialism against such descriptions. In his public lecture of 1945 *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre challenges the communists, Catholics and any other deriders of existentialism that viewed it as a gloomy, negative philosophy that lacks hope. Sartre hoped to set the record straight by arguing: "that what we mean by 'existentialism' is a doctrine that makes human life possible and also affirms that every truth and every action imply an environment and a human subjectivity" (Sartre 2007, 18). "Subjectivism means, on the one hand, the freedom of the individual subject to choose what he will be, and, on the other, man's inability to transcend subjectivity" (Sartre 2007, 23-4). The common thing that all existentialist share, whether Christian or an Atheist like Sartre, is that 'existence precedes essence'. And it is an inversion of this formulation that a Husserlian informed phenomenology brings about in its quest for accounting for the structures of experience.

the theatre practitioners of this tradition do. However, this characterisation leaves aside a fundamental aspect of the experience of absurdity that the theatre of the absurd puts forth and relies on, that is, the specific way one manages to 'make sense of the lack of sense'. This means that even the failure of sense can be experienced as a particular way of making sense happen, and this possibility to manufacture meaningfulness out of meaninglessness constitutes, according to us, a fundamental aspect of the theatrical staging of absurdity. Our hypothesis is best formulated by the following: the radicality of absurdity that the theater of the absurd describes, does not only rely upon the loss of meaning, but on the human ability to find significance even in the lack of sense. The mere absence of meaning is not radical enough to express the specificity of the paradoxical experience that absurdity gives rise to. Esslin's account of the absurd misses the specific quality of the experience of the absurd, an experience in which one paradoxically manages to make meanginglessness meaningful.

We believe that this positive conception of absurdity that considers it as a significant part of human activity rather than a negative character of human existence is pervasive in the theater of the absurd and constitute as fundamental an aspect of it as the existential determinations that Esslin's analyses focus upon. In order to describe this experience as it unfolds in Beckett's play, we will draw upon a Husserl-inspired phenomenological approach that analyses the structures of the experience of meaning and that will make this relation between meaningfulness and meaninglessness explicit. Even though Esslin's theory of the absurd is a critical point of departure for an analysis of the playwrights and directors forming the tradition (Beckett, Pinter, Ionesco et. al.) and approaches to current playwrights (such as the contemporary work of Norway's Jon Fosse)[3], the spectre of this well-worked out, but worn theory continues to haunt the future of the absurd in theatre. Especially in its use as a *device* in the writing of new plays, and in the direction and/or dramaturgy of old and new work. With this concern, there is a responsibility to revisit plays with a revised phenomenological concept of the absurd that might have been overlooked due to an Esslin-influenced reading—just as any revision of the theatrical canon insists upon.[4]

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[3] Norwegian playwright Jon Fosse is one of the most produced playwrights in Europe and has been called "the Beckett of the 21st Century" (*Le Monde*). The minimalist character of Beckett's later writings can be seen in Fosse's undramatic, action free, "discontinued dialogues" and "iterative technique" (Committee 2010). There is an "open-endedness to Fosse's writing" that lacks "specificity", with "sparse phrases: near misses in communication between them" (Logan 2011).

[4] Significant revisions of the theatrical canon can be seen most notably in feminist and post-colonial approaches to theatre.

The role and importance of phenomenology as a philosophical approach for understanding the content and dramaturgy of the plays included within 'The Theatre of the Absurd' is undeniable. On a biographical note, even though Beckett readily denied any influence of philosophical ideas, his relationship to key figures within the existential tradition of phenomenology while living in Paris has been well documented, along with his following of the controversial contours of this philosophical thought from Husserl (through neo-Kantian Wilhelm Windelband), to the influences of Heidegger (through Beckett's student and friend Jean Beaufret at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris)[5], and more personally, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone De Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty—all with whom Beckett interacted in the interwar years (Maude and Feldman 2009, 4; Esslin 2001, 29-91). Whether directly experienced, or by osmosis from his immersion in this milieu, these influences have undoubtedly contributed to the phenomenological character of his dramatic and literary works, but also to the orientation of scholarship that focuses upon this history.

Esslin's approach rightly emphasises the specific *experience* of absurdity that playwrights let us access in a more radical way than existential philosophers. In developing his theory, Esslin has remarked on the historical relationship between existential philosophy and the theatre produced by writers such as Beckett. Esslin forms a useful distinction between the "existential theatre" of philosophers, and the "theatre of the absurd" written by the poets and dramatists (Esslin 24). On the one hand, the plays of Camus and Sartre "argue about the absurdity of the human condition"; never abandoning their "highly lucid and logically constructed reasoning" (Esslin 24), while the dramatists present absurdity in concrete images on the stage: "merely *present*[ing] it in being". Esslin's conceit here is that the latter provides insight into an 'experience' of absurdity, rather than a mere rational theory of irrationality.

And yet, Esslin's conceptuality falls short of analysing the structures of the very experience which he contributed to in stressing the significance of. If experience is what differentiates these two approaches in dramatising the absurd, then a theory of the absurd in theatre (on Esslin's account) demands a phenomenological method in order to say something about— "to *describe"*—what he regards to be first and foremost "an astonishing phenomenon" (Esslin 28). We believe that this feature of absurdity can only be revealed by being attentive to

[5] Interestingly, French phenomenology in the late 80s was predominantly shaped by a Heideggerian "return" to Husserl, largely influenced through the teachings of Jean Beaufret. This kind of influence on the major scholars and teachers of contemporary phenomenology is not only historically significant, but important in understanding how phenomenology is practised today in relation to Husserl's original project. Participating in Beaufret's discussions, or attending his teachings on phenomenology would have influenced a Heideggerian reading of the tradition for most of his interlocutors. For more see Benoist 2001; Courtine 2016.

the experience of the absurd staged by some of the playwrights mentioned by Esslin. And by asking a stronger phenomenological question about the structures of the experience: how can we describe phenomena that may feel (in also a bodily way) out of step, back to front, uneasy, not following the usual way etc.? This needs to be asked in place of characterising the phenomena with existentially derived categories. If such a phenomenological tendency were followed, we might find absurdity to be far more meaningful than what the settled upon categories deride. Working with and against Esslin here, the phenomenological approach of this chapter resists an existential interpretation of the human condition as negatively meaningless, purposeless and senseless, whether philosophically thought through and well-argued (Camus, Sartre et al.), or appearing in the flesh upon the stage (Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter et al.).[6]

Our approach will foreground experience over the distancing effects of theoretical conjecture that arise conveniently from within the "natural attitude"[7], while Esslin's theory interprets an experience of absurdity as a philosophical description of human existence. According to his analysis, the experience of the absurd is nothing but the expression (either theatrical or philosophical) of the *condition* the characters find themselves in. This is to say that the experience of absurdity is not analysed for itself, but only as the expression of something else—as the manifestation of the human condition which is taken to constitute the originary source of the absurdity of existence. Even though Esslin stresses the importance of the theatrical representation of the *experience* of the absurd in the plays he analyses, his account focuses less on this experience *per se* than on the existential situation that this specific kind of experience expresses and reveals. The meaning of the absurdity experienced by the characters of the plays is traced back to the existential condition of humanity and cannot be found in the experience as such. His analysis misses the proper meaning of it since he looks for it *outside* experience, thus constantly overlooking it.

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[6] There is little use of Husserl in a phenomenological analysis of Beckett's theatre, but Husserl is not entirely overlooked by scholars in Beckett studies. See Feldman 2009; Nixon 2009, Stewart 2009.

[7] We refer here to Edmund Husserl's characterisation of the natural world as it surrounds us, factually existing and continuously so. As long as the world continues for us in this way, "undisturbed" we are "[h]uman beings who are living naturally, objectivating, judging, feeling, willing *'in the natural attitude'"* (Husserl, Ideas 1, S27, 51). The world and its objects are "on hand" for us "before any thinking" (S31, 57), we "know of" them "as being there and here in the surroundings" (S27, 52). The natural scientist will aim to understand this natural world through theoretical conjecture: certain "position-takings" about the world, while the phenomenologist will seek to radically alter the kinds of judgments that we posit about the world through the natural attitude with a method of reduction called the *epoché* [ἐποχή], which is the practice of parenthesising, or putting something into brackets.

Esslin's notions of a theatre of the absurd have developed from within a strong historical context of post war despair reflecting "the attitude most genuinely representative of [this] time" (Esslin 2001, 23). Experiencing the absurdness of life appears to be an examination of the events at this time, and are characterised as meaningless. They are events that have causally shaped the kind of human responses that characters like Hamm and Clov present to us on Beckett's stage. Rather than examining the structures of experiencing the absurd as a phenomenon that carries the same "meaning-fulfillment" as other phenomena, the lived experience of the absurd has been hijacked by an epoch, and defined and delimited by such definitions as, the "[a]bsurd is that which is devoid of purpose . . . man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless" (Ionesco in Esslin, 23). While being a valid diagnosis of the human condition following the destruction and devastation brought on by the wars and totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, should we understand our current condition in the same way? If not, then how do we identify, analyse and create a contemporary theatre of the absurd within the limitations of Esslin's definition, or any other such contextually derived terms?

What the theatre of the absurd demands is a phenomenologically derived concept that brackets the facticity of socio-political and cultural events, and which examines the very structures of our intentional consciousness, that are *lived* within such contexts. It needs to be a phenomenology firmly distinguished from an ontological analysis of the existential horizon of the absurdity of the human condition, which has been the more tantalising aspect of phenomenology for an analysis of absurdity in the theatre. This is why, far from finding its starting point in the philosophies of existence developed after Martin Heidegger by Jean-Paul Sartre or Maurice Merleau-Ponty, our approach needs to go back to phenomenology's founder Edmund Husserl's analysis of the acts through which one is able to make sense of their experience.

In the remaining sections, we intend to recover from the detritus of mid twentieth century despair a phenomenologically derived concept of the absurd for the theatre. We offer a sketch for an alternative, 'non-existential' interpretation of the phenomenon based solely on Husserl's theory of meaning and his conception of fulfilment.

Formal and Grammatical Absurdity

The breakthrough of the phenomenological method in Husserl's works is grounded in his description of the relation between meaningfulness and some specific acts through which meaning arises, called 'meaning-bestowing acts' (sinngebende Akte). If, as Ricoeur suggests, the first question of phenomenology is the question about the meaning of meaning – "que signifie signifier?" ("what does meaning mean?"), then the question about meaninglessness; the possibility of the absence of meaning; or the absurdity that results from its failure, constitutes a key question for a phenomenological project (Ricoeur 1986, 186).

Husserl marks a fundamental difference between two possible ways for meaning to be missing, which will prove to be particularly interesting for our approach. As Husserl attempts to establish the *a priori* laws that govern the sphere of complex meanings, and distinguish sense from nonsense, he stresses in his 4th *Logical Investigation* the fundamental difference between the laws that guard against meaninglessness (*Widersinn*) and the laws that prevent mere nonsense (*Unsinn*). While the former are the *logical* laws that describe the conditions of formal truth or objectivity, the latter are identified as the *grammatical a priori* laws that determine possible forms of complex meanings. For a linguistic expression, making sense and having some kind of objective meaning are two different things: meaninglessness does not coincide only with mere nonsense. A linguistic expression that falls short of referring to an object or to a state of affairs might still be able to make sense and to have a certain meaning. For example, "a round square" might be meaningless insofar as it fails to constitute a relation to some kind of existing object (even an object of thought or imagination), but it is not nonsensical as are grammatically ill-formed expressions such as "this careless is green", "more intense is round", "a round or", etc. (Husserl 2001, LI 4, 67).

Such an analysis is of particular interest to us because it establishes a distinction between two different ways of understanding the extent of absurdity, that is, whether meaningfulness is considered in relation to the logical or grammatical boundaries to meaning. If absurdity was to be understood as expressing the absence of meaning, it would be specifically related to grammatical nonsense (*Unsinn*). In the combination of words such as 'a round is or', 'a man and is', Husserl insists that

> the coordinated words give us the indirect idea of *some* unitary meaning they express, but it is apodictically clear that no such meaning can exist, that significant parts of these sorts, thus combined, cannot consist with each other in a unified meaning (Husserl 2001, LI 4, 67; 1984 HUA XIX/1, 334-5).

Words are not articulated in a way that give rise to a unified meaning, which could either fail or succeed in establishing a relation to an object. In such cases, Husserl writes, "the meaning is what is precisely missing" (Husserl, LI 4, 67; 1984, HUA XIX/1, 334-5). This is very different to the case of logical meaninglessness (*Widersinn*), in which the absurdity results from the inability of an 'existent meaning' to establish a relation to an 'existent object':

> The combination 'a round square' really yields a unified meaning, having its mode of existence or being in the *realm of ideal meanings, but it is apodictically evident* that no existent object can correspond to such an existent meaning (Husserl 2001, LI 4, 67; 1984 HUA XIX/1, 334-5).

Husserl speaks of this second case as a logical (or "formal") absurdity (*formale Absurdität*), whereby it accounts for a kind of meaninglessness that is only concerned with the question of the objectivity, or truth of the total meaning (Husserl 1984 HUA XiX/1, 302). In these cases, the combination of words complies with the grammatical or syntactical laws that determine the production of sense. The words are combined so as to give rise to a meaning intention (*Bedeutungsintention*), but this intention fails to establish a relation to a specific object[8]. The absurdity no longer stems from the absence of meaning, but from the *logical* contradiction (*'Widerspruch'*)[9] experienced whenever we are to deal with contradictory meanings. Thus, while nonsense is grounded in a *syntactical* incompatibility between grammatical signs, meaninglessness expresses a *logical* incompatibility between the different parts of a unified meaning.

Exploring Husserl's formal absurdity in Beckett's *Endgame*, we can how such logical contradictions lay the ground for the experience of the absurd, preventing the blind Hamm and his servant Clov from making complete sense, although their dialogue is not nonsensical. In an

[8] Husserl describes any act of consciousness as an intention (*Meinung*), insofar as it is directed at some object. The object can be given in an intuition, and in this case the intention is 'fulfilled'. When it is not the case, the intention remains empty. These empty intentions are never fulfilled by the object intended itself: the intention that intends a round square is empty as there is no object that we can grasp.

[9] Only found in the first edition of the Logical Investigations (Husserl 1984, HUA XIX/1, 302).

early excerpt of the play, Hamm and Clov point out the contradictions in each other's speech in a way that seems to make their dialogue impossible:

Hamm:	Nature has forgotten us.
Clov:	There is no more nature.
Hamm:	No more nature! You exaggerate.
Clov:	In the vicinity.
Hamm:	But we breathe, we change! We lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom! Our ideals!
Clov:	Then she hasn't forgotten us.
Hamm:	But you say there is none.

Fig. 1: Excerpt of dialogue from *Endgame* (Beckett 1964, 14).

This crossed demonstration of each other's contradictory speech plays a strategical role in Hamm and Clov's dialogue, as it opens up the logical space of the absurd, a space in which words can make sense without being able to properly say anything about anything.

From this point, the dialogue between Hamm and Clov develops a form of absurdity that echoes in an interesting way Husserl's analysis of meaninglessness, as it emphasizes this inability to intend a specific object, leading to a compromising of objective truth. Hamm's blindness fails to allow him to intend the object "dog" entirely through sight, relying upon Clov's vague and sometimes false descriptions to help constitute the dog's colour, type, sex and mobility:

Hamm:	Is my dog ready?
Clov:	He lacks a leg.
Hamm:	Is he silky?
Clov:	He's kind of Pomeranian
Hamm:	Go and get him.
Clov:	He lacks a leg
Hamm:	Go and get him! (*Exit Clov*) We're getting on.
	Enter Clov holding by one of three legs a black toy dog.
Clov:	Your dogs are here.

He hands the dog to Hamm who feels it, fondles it.

Hamm: He's white, isn't he?

Clov: Nearly.

Hamm: What do you mean, nearly? Is he white or isn't he?

Clov: He isn't.

Pause

Hamm: You've forgotten the sex.

Clov: (*vexed*). But he isn't finished. The sex goes on at the end.

Pause

Hamm: You haven't put on his ribbon.

Clov: (*angrily*). But he isn't finished, I tell you! First you finish your dog and then you put on his ribbon!

Pause

Hamm: Can he stand?

Clov: I don't know.

Hamm: Try. (*He hands the dog to Clov who places it on the ground*)

Well?

Clov: Wait!

He squats down and tries to get the dog to stand on its three legs, fails, lets it go. The dog falls on its side.

Hamm: (*impatiently*). Well?

Clov: He's standing

Hamm: (*groping for the dog*). Where? Where is he?

Clov holds up the dog in a standing position.

Clov: There.

He squats down and tries to get the dog to stand on its three legs, fails, let it go. The dog falls on its side.

Hamm: (*impatiently*). Well?

Clov: He's standing.

Hamm: (*groping for the dog*). Where? Where is he?

Clov holds up the dog in a standing position.

Clov: There.

He takes Hamm's hand and guides it toward's the dog's head.

Hamm: (*his hand on the dog's head*). Is he gazing at me?

Clov: Yes.

Hamm: (*his hand on the dog's head*). Is he gazing at me?

Clov: Yes.

Hamm: *(proudly)*. As if he were asking me to take him for a walk*?*

Clov: If you like.

Hamm: (*as before*). Or as if he were begging me for a bone. *(He withdraws his hand*.) Leave him like that, standing there imploring me.

Clov straightens up. The dog falls on its side.

Fig. 2: Excerpt of dialogue from *Endgame* (Beckett 1964, 30-31).

Formal (or logical) absurdity is clearly at play here. The questions asked by Hamm and the answers given by Clov rely upon an initial failure of meaning (as its *a priori* laws demand) in what Hamm intends about the features of the dog and its behavior: no specific object can be realised in its fullest intuitive sense by the blind Hamm. He does have the sense of touch, but interestingly only asks of the dog's colour, or speaks of its lack of "sex" and "ribbon", these latter aspects of the intention that he is unable to fulfill because the toy has neither a sex nor a ribbon in its unfinished form. Clov is the maker of the toy, and is open to say whatever he likes because of this fact. Language, by proxy, fulfills Hamm's meaning intentions in some way, while also participating in the highly indeterminate production of meaning: a fabricated world for Hamm that does not correspond truthfully to the object that both Clov and the audience can see, and which Clov can futurally determine. This disjuncture of the degree of fulfilment experienced between characters and audience sharpens the absurdity.

The distinction between grammatical and logical boundaries to meaning is crucial to our perspective, as it opens up an original understanding of the *experience* of the absurd that is based on our ability to be sensitive to another distinction between the mere absence of sense or senselessness (*das Sinnlose*), and the specific experience of the failure of meaning (*das Absurde*) (Husserl 1984, HUA XIX/1, 334). Grammatical nonsense cannot make us feel at odds with meaning in the way logical meaninglessness does, since it does not even give rise to a potentially meaningful experience: grammatical nonsense prevents us from experiencing any kind of meaning whatsoever. Whereas logical meaninglessness describes a paradoxical experience in which an act of meaning is still performed even though its intention is bound to fail; it is not able to properly refer to any particular object, even purely ideal or fictional. Logical meaninglessness is paradoxical, since meaningfulness seems to be at the same time

grammatically possible (as the words combine into a unified meaning) and logically impossible (in virtue of the *a priori* contradiction between the different parts of the meaning). But the possibility of meaning must be granted if we want to account for the specific experience that absurdity relies upon, for it is only when meaningfulness is thought possible that one can experience its loss.

Acts of Fulfilment and the Experience of Meaninglessness

It should now be clear how Husserl's analysis allows a non-existential description of the experience of absurd, grounded in a theory of meaning that acknowledges the possibility of making sense *even while failing to mean anything*. In order to describe this experience of failure, we need to go back to the 1st *Logical Investigation* in which Husserl analyses the relation between empty meaning intentions and the intuitions that can fulfil them. This relation of fulfilment (*Erfüllung*) is taken by Husserl to be somehow constitutive of meaningfulness, insofar as it is in charge of the "fullness" without which meaning intentions would remain empty:

> A name, e.g., names its object whatever the circumstances, insofar as it *means* that object. But if the object is not intuitively before one, and so not before one as a named or meant object, mere meaning is all there is to it. If the originally *empty* meaning intention is now fulfilled, the relation to an object is realized, the naming becomes an actual, conscious relation between name and object named (Husserl 2001, LI 1, 192).

This conception of the role that intuitive fulfilment plays with respect to the determination of meaning, explains why the logical possibility of the relation to an object matters so much, that a grammatically correct expression failing to intend a specific object (like "a round square") is 'meaningless'. If we stick with a 'rigorous' concept of meaning, 'objectlessness' (*Gegenstandlosigkeit*) and meaninglessness (*Bedeutungslosigkeit*) are synonymous:

> to use an expression significantly, and to refer expressively to an object (to form a presentation of it), are one and the same. […] An expression has *meaning* when a corresponding object to it exists, and it is meaningless when no such object exists (Husserl 2001, LI1, 119-120; HUA XIX/1, 59-60).

Insofar as it stresses the intimate connection between meaning intentions and the intuitions that are only able to provide them with their intended object, the relation of fulfilment accounts for the fact that words are not only expected to make sense, but build a positive connection to the world by establishing a meaningful relation to objects (whether real, ideal or fictional).

This notion of fulfilment fleshes out the experience of the absurd we are trying to describe. The contradiction experienced in an expression like "a round square" is not only an incompatibility between the different parts of the intended meaning, but an "incompatibility of the partial meanings *in the intended unity of fulfilment*" (Husserl 2001, LI 1,119, emphasis ours). Absurdity is less the expression of a purely linguistic contradiction, than the lived experience of an intention meeting the logical impossibility of its fulfilment. It consists in a misguided use of language confronted by its own failure, as we find in the dialogue between Hamm and Clov in the earlier excerpt, and fails to give access to the objects we mean and to connect us to the world in a meaningful way.

However, is this failure to be described in a strictly negative way? Should we not acknowledge that this kind of failure also participates in our attempt to connect to the world through words, and that the experience of the absurd bears some significance beyond its apparent negativity? We would like to suggest that Husserl's analyses and our extension of his theory of meaning and fulfilment opens up the space for a positive reading of absurdity that brings forth another concept of the absurd.

Indeed, the incompatibility that expresses the impossibility of fulfilling the meaning intention in the example of the round square might make the expression *meaningless* (absurd in the sense of the *Widersinn*), but, as we noted earlier, it does not make it *nonsensical*. A contradictory meaning might not be able to *say* anything, it nevertheless *shows* its own meaninglessness, its own inability to be fulfilled by any possible intuition. Intending a round square is absurd but not nonsensical since we can still somehow understand what the expression intends and fails to realise. We are still able to tell what would be the case if this expression was meaningful: it would refer to a certain kind of square – the square that has the property of being round. Just as we can find meaning in the failure of Hamm to fulfil his intentions with the vague and ambiguous descriptions of Clov's. Thus, in pushing Husserl a little further, we could say that the *meaningfulness* of this expression (and Hamm's relation to his toy dog) is to be meaningless, since it is the particular way this expression makes sense for us: it makes sense as a contradictory meaningless expression where its parts are incompatible with each other.

This experience can then be described as having a certain fundamental significance for the understanding of what sense is about, or what "meaning means" as Ricoeur maintained. It is a fundamental experience because this kind of absurdity is less the intrinsically negative (and existentially challenging) experience of the failure of meaning than the experience of the boundaries of sense: it is an experience that is still meaningful, and through which one can establish the very limits of meaningfulness. Such an experience is twofold: it is at the same time the experience of meaninglessness, and the positive understanding of what constitutes meaninglessness; it is the very experience that makes meaninglessness both meaningful and significant. One can tell, even in the linguistic experience of the impossibility for an expression to be meaningful, what prevents it from entering the realm of meaningfulness. Paradoxically, the failure of the meaning intention does not prevent us from being able to somehow make sense of the lack of meaning.

Frustration and unconditional absurdity

This meaningfulness of meaninglessness is corroborated by an aspect of Husserl's theory of fulfilment—making it remarkable. In going against a superficial reading of his concept, Husserl stresses that the phenomenon of fulfilment is not only fit for cases in which intuition is perfectly adequate to the meaning intention that it fulfils. The fulfilment of meaning intentions includes the possibility of conflictual fulfilments, i.e. cases in which the act of fulfilment involves a certain amount of 'frustration'(*Enttäuschung*) due to the conflictual relation (*Widerstreit*) that is established between the intention and the intuition that fails to fulfil it. Although frustration results from the failure of fulfilment, it should not be described as a negation of the relation of fulfilment:

> the negative expression that we normally use in this case, e.g. even the term 'non-fulfilment', has no merely privative meaning: it points to a new descriptive fact, a form of synthesis as peculiar as fulfilment
> (Husserl 2001, LI 6, 211-12; 1984 HUA XIX/2, 574-5).

The act of fulfilment performs a kind of synthesis even when it gives rise to a conflictual or negative form of accomplishment.

> The synthesis of recognition, of 'knowing', is the consciousness of a certain agreement (*Übereinstimmung*). The possibility correlated with agreement is, however,

> ‘disagreement’ (*Nichtübereinstimmung*) or conflict (Widerstreit): intention may not accord with a significant intention, but may ‘quarrel’ with it. Conflict ‘separates’, but the experience of conflict puts things into relation and unity: it is a form of synthesis (Husserl 2001, LI 6, 211-12; 1984 HUA, XIX/2, 574-5).

This means that the phenomenon of fulfilment does not end with the experience of conflict. It is continued throughout this conflictual experience so that another kind of synthesis can occur: a “synthesis of distinction” (*Synthesis der Unterscheidung*). This form of synthesis constitutes a *negative* kind of fulfilment, but is no less a form of fulfilment than the synthesis of identification, which recognition involves. If for instance I think A to be red, when it shows itself to be ‘in fact’ green, “an intention to red quarrels with an intention to green in this showing forth, i.e. in this application to intuition”. But even in this case, a certain form of fulfilment is maintained all the way through, and even within the frustration that results from the conflict. The very possibility for an intention to be in conflict with the intuition expected to fulfil it presupposes that the same A has been identified in the two acts of signification and intuition. “An intention can only be frustrated in conflict in so far as it forms part of a wider intention whose completing part is fulfilled” (Husserl 2001, LI 6, 212, 253).

With this idea, we emphasise that acts of fulfilment have a phenomenological plasticity in that *they always find a way to fit with the intention no matter what it is*, and as long as this intention makes sense. Almost anything can work as a way to fulfil a meaning intention. This is for instance the case in the following part of the dialogue between Hamm and Clov:

Hamm:	The alarm, is it working?
Clov:	Why wouldn’t it be working?
Hamm:	Because it’s worked too much.
Clov:	But it’s hardly worked at all.
Hamm:	(*angrily*). Then because it’s worked too little!

Hamm’s worry about the alarm is absurd insofar as anything, even contradictory reasons, can justify his concern. His ‘intentions’ can be fulfilled by whatever, which is the reason why, in the excerpt quoted above, Clov ends up answering to Hamm’s obsessive queries about the way the dog looks: “if you like”.

Similarly, in Husserl, even frustrating fulfilments, despite being negative, also count as possible ways to fulfil the very intention that it paradoxically failed to bring to intuitive ‘fullness’ (“Fülle”) (Husserl 2001, L I6, 233; Hua XIX/2, 606). This is true of the scene between Hamm and Clov from our earlier example:

Hamm:	He's white, isn't he?
Clov:	Nearly.
Hamm:	What do you mean, nearly? Is he white or isn't he?
Clov:	He isn't.

Fig. 3: Excerpt of dialogue from *Endgame* (Beckett 1964, 30).

Hamm thinks the dog is white, while in actual fact it is black. Hamm never intuits the toy as black, nor is he enabled by Clov who answers ambiguously that it is "nearly" white, then resolutely that it "isn't". Despite the failure of fulfillment in the meaning intention of the dog's colour (which Hamm seems satisfied with) we experience precisely this 'quarreling' and 'frustration of conflict'. While the same dog remains in every act of signification and intuition, there is a conflict between the dog being white, nearly white and not being white—which suggests any other colour. Unlike the earlier example of the conflict between 'A being green' and 'A being red', whereby the intention of A is ultimately fulfilled by the fact that it is green, the playtext is left open to what we as an audience know, what Clov continues to conceal, and what Hamm himself is content to be left with: not knowing the colour of the dog. The open endedness of this quarrel or conflict deepens the absurdity of this scene and another sense of the play's title.

In light of our expanded reading of fulfilment in Husserl, we offer a new concept of the absurd that goes beyond meaninglessness or formal absurdity. The kind of absurdity we have in mind here arises from the possibility to make sense of meaninglessness. The specific experience of the absurd is enhanced by the constant possibility of finding some sort of fulfilment even through the experience of frustrated attempts to mean something (to make an intention meaningful). Such absurdity is neither, grammatical, or formal, since the lack of the syntactical or objective conditions of sense is still not enough to prevent some kind of meaningful experience from happening. The 'grammatical' and 'formal' concept of the absurd are *conditional*, since they both account for a kind of absurdity that results from the impossibility of fulfilling the conditions of meaningfulness.

This is not the case with the conception of the absurd that our interpretation of Husserl's theory of fulfilment makes possible. In virtue of this, we call it *unconditional* absurdity, not only because it is not derived from a philosophical or existential assessment of the human condition, but because it is precisely no longer conditioned by the impossibility of sense. Far

from expressing the crisis of meaningfulness or the absence, loss, disappearance of sense, such absurdity results instead from an *excess* of meaning: it arises from the impossible failure of fulfilment, from the impossibility to experience a radical loss of meaning. A world in which *everything* makes sense is as absurd as a world where *nothing* does. In both cases we lose the possibility to experience meaning as a relation to the world where it can *either* fail or succeed.

Conclusion

We claim that this new understanding of the absurd that is grounded upon the experience of the impossibility to be confronted by a lack of meaning is at work in the theatre of the absurd, alongside the existentialist ontology that has predominately characterised it. Our Husserlian inspired analysis of the three levels of absurdity does not aim at rejecting the existential approach to absurdity that Esslin develops, but provides a necessary complement to his theory. Esslin rightly sees the weakness of the philosophical analysis of absurdity and the strength of the theatrical staging of the absurd, insofar as the former is far too conceptual to be able to account for the specific experience that creates absurdity. But Esslin's rejection of philosophical concepts prevents him from giving a satisfying account of the experience of the absurd he rightly emphasises in theatre, as his description of this experience is ultimately grounded upon an existential interpretation of the meaninglessness of human condition that does not do justice to the richness of the dialectics between meaningfulness and meaninglessness that the experience of the absurd entails. Husserl's phenomenology provides some interesting concepts that allow us to deepen Esslin's project and bring it to a more satisfying accomplishment. Husserl's theories of meaning and fulfilment allow a description of the various ways in which the production of meaning constantly deals with absurdity, nonsense and meaninglessness.

Our concept of 'unconditional absurdity' shows that absurdity never consists solely in the lack of meaning or its absence, for on the contrary, its meaninglessness is a meaningful part of the human condition. It is just as possible to encounter feelings of despair because of the asphyxiating excess of meaning than just when having lost it. Meaning is everywhere even when it is meaningless. Absurdity belongs to the everyday experience of trying to make sense; it should not be solely, nor negatively understood as the result of historically located events. Absurdism, and our challenge to its existentially derived conceptualisations, is grounded upon

the most common experience of language. Especially where language is a constant attempt to make sense of our lived experience.

To have gone further with a phenomenology of the absurd in this chapter, or to suggest a dramaturgical method for a theatre of the absurd based on phenomenology, would be to undermine the lengthy and fine-grained process of a fully-fledged analysis of the absurd that examining a single playtext and/or production would entail. In the space of this brief introductory chapter, we reserve the need to further develop concepts in Husserl's later philosophy, and suspend a more fertile discussion of how such a reconceptualisation of the absurd could contribute to a dramaturgical practice using phenomenology.

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